

George B. Dorr (1855–1944)

Acadia National Park
Maine

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



George Bucknam Dorr, known as the father of Acadia National Park, spent most of his adult life bringing the park into being, caring for the park, and expanding it. Charles W. Eliot might have been the man who called the first meeting of what would become the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations in 1901, but it was Dorr's vision and passion that ensured lands would be set aside for preservation and protection for future generations.

History

Dorr was a private citizen whose life covered the last half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. He came from privilege, the son of affluent Bostonians. He inherited fortunes from both his parents. He attended Harvard University and Oxford and traveled widely in Europe with his parents. He was a gentleman scholar and lover of nature who first visited Mount Desert Island in 1868 on a vacation with his parents and made the decision to make the island his primary home. The remains of the family residence, Old Farm, at Compass Harbor in Bar Harbor, are part of Acadia National Park today. He never married; instead he focused his time, energy, and intellect on preserving the natural beauty of his beloved island. Over four decades he worked tirelessly to acquire tracts of land for protection. He persuaded and cajoled others to give land or funds with which to acquire them, and he gave several parcels of his own.

Collecting Land

This project was never easy or straightforward. Challenges were frequent. In early 1913 while at home in Boston, hoping to enjoy a peaceful winter social season there, he received word that some in the Maine state legislature were determined to revoke the nonprofit status of the Trustees. He immediately set out for Augusta, Maine, and spent days successfully fighting the measure. He realized at that time, however, that the lands he'd fought so hard to acquire needed the greater protection of the federal government, and he began a new drive to secure that protection. Soon he was on his way to Washington, meeting with powerful and influential friends there. He would make many trips armed with maps and deeds and titles; he would provide more and more information to the federal bureaucracy and deal with political stumbling blocks. Finally in 1916, President Woodrow Wilson created Sieur de Monts National Monument. This process had taken more than two years, but with faith, great persistence, and the help of influential friends, Dorr made it happen. While the Trustees would have preferred national park status, Dorr chose to have Wilson sign off on the national monument rather than waiting for Congress to act on the national park. With the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916, many were in line for designation as a national park. It was not until 1919 that Lafayette National Park came into being.

As the first superintendent of Trustees lands, George Dorr built the spring house at Sieur de Monts in 1909 and carved "The Sweet Waters of Acadia" on a nearby rock. Today, this location has come to symbolize the enthusiasm and contributions of Dorr and other early-20th-century citizens in the creation and preservation of these lands. Additional tracts were added; Dorr worked closely with the Civilian Conservation Corps as they worked in the park and with John D. Rockefeller Jr. when he built the carriage road system. Dorr was ever vigilant that anything done in the park would be of the highest quality and not mar the incredible beauty and uniqueness of the area.

Later life

His later years would certainly bring satisfaction but also trials and difficulties. He loved to hike and walked all over the island. He swam in Frenchman Bay almost daily, even having to break ice along the edges to do so. He had a heart attack in 1934 while enjoying his morning swim and was told he had six months to live (he lived ten more years). Eventually he lost his sight. All these things hardly slowed him down. While intensely protective of the land, his own health and personal welfare were never a concern to him.

Dorr always believed his personal fortune could absorb purchasing land on behalf of the park forever, but this was not the case. At the onset, he declined any salary except for one dollar a month as the first official director of the national monument, but by the time the park became Acadia in 1929, he gladly accepted a regular salary. That was his only real cash remaining at his retirement. His great fortune had dwindled to almost nothing from his passion for the park and from mismanagement by those he entrusted with his affairs. A good friend tells of "stealing" \$2,000 from Dorr to set aside for his funeral and other final expenses. Otherwise his beloved Dorr would have spent it on books or some other good thing.

George Bucknam Dorr fell at Old Farm on August 5, 1944, and the heart that was supposed to have given out ten years ago finally stopped. There is a simple plaque at Sieur de Monts honoring his memory and dedication.

Saved to future generations as it has been to us, in the wild primeval beauty of the nature it exhibits, of ancient rocks and still more ancient sea, with infinite detail of life and landscape interest between, the spirit and mind of man will surely find in it in the years and centuries to come an inspiration and a means of growth as essential to them ever and anon as are fresh air and sunshine to the body.

- George B. Dorr